2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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Upper Egypt

CHAPTER VIII

INTER-VILLAGE FIGHTS. THE LAW OF REVENGE

THE Egyptian *felläḥīn* are by no means a military people, but in their inter-village fights, which are not of infrequent occurrence, they sometimes display a quite surprising ferocity. It must be remembered that to the Egyptian peasant his own village is the centre of the universe, and people of other villages, though treated with hospitality and courtesy as visitors, are, in some cases, looked upon with as much suspicion as if they were positive aliens. As will be seen later on, hostilities between adjacent villages were no less a marked feature of Egyptian life in antiquity than at the present day.

The inhabitants of some mutually hostile villages hardly ever meet without at least attempting to pick a quarrel, and I have been myself a spectator of such conflicts on more than one occasion. In most parts of the world it is usually found that the market-place is neutral ground, and that there even the most antagonistic peoples will meet unarmed. In some parts of Egypt, however, not only is the market-place the site regularly chosen for village conflicts, but fights which take place there are by no means confined to non-market-days! Various weapons (Figs. 57 and 58) are used at these inter-village encounters. The commonest are the *nabbūt* (a very stout single-stick), a primitive type of spear, and a battleaxe. The spear consists of a long wooden shaft terminating in a slender iron point or in a plain or barbed leaf-shaped blade. The axe is a long pole surmounted by a winged iron head. Stones too are used, and are thrown with deadly effect.

The first battle of this kind that I witnessed took place in connexion with the sinking of a large boat in a canal, the muddy bottom of which held it fast. An attempt had to be made to raise the vessel, to which two strong ropes were attached by divers. Large crowds had collected on either side of the canal, and the services of some of these people were enlisted in the efforts to raise the boat, but most of them, like myself, were mere spectators.

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The two ropes attached to the boat by the divers were very long, as well as strong, and one was held by either group of helpers (Fig. 59). First one rope was pulled by the men on one bank, then, after a few turns, the other was tugged from the other side of the canal. This went on regularly for some time, the whole proceeding being well organized by the officer in charge of the district. However, as it turned out, the two groups of people facing one another across the canal belonged to two antagonistic villages, and, before long, stones of considerable size began to fly from one bank to another. The officer, an old friend of mine, rushed up and begged me to take shelter while he settled the matter, but I was far too interested to beat a retreat, as I wanted to see what would happen. He, armed with a stout *kurbāg* (a very powerful leather whip), rushed in among the crowd that had actually started the fray, slashing right and left. By this display of promptitude and courage he put an end to what might have been a serious and bloody fight. Meanwhile, I dodged about trying to get a snapshot of the combat, but the excited crowds, rushing hither and thither, frustrated all my endeavours. Eventually the villagers who started the fight were no longer allowed to assist, and were made to squat in rows at a distance, in dire disgrace They appeared utterly unmoved, and when I spoke to them and

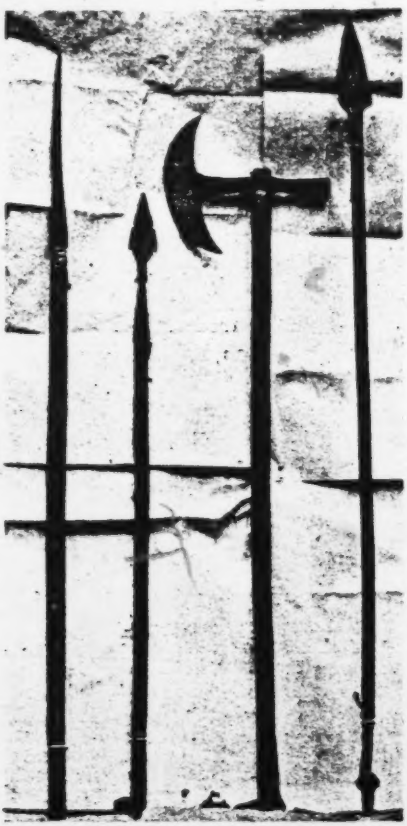

FIG. 57. WEAPONS USED IN BLOOD-FEUDS AND INTER-VILLAGE FIGHTS

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asked them why they had behaved so badly I was met by the friendliest grins.

On another occasion I happened to be present at a fight which took place at the annual festival held in honour of a local sheikh. One of the villages mentioned above again engaged in battle with the people in whose village the festival was taking place. The chief guard of that village, a hospitable man as well as an excellent disciplinarian, invited me to visit his house after I had seen the various shows which are an important feature of such festivities.

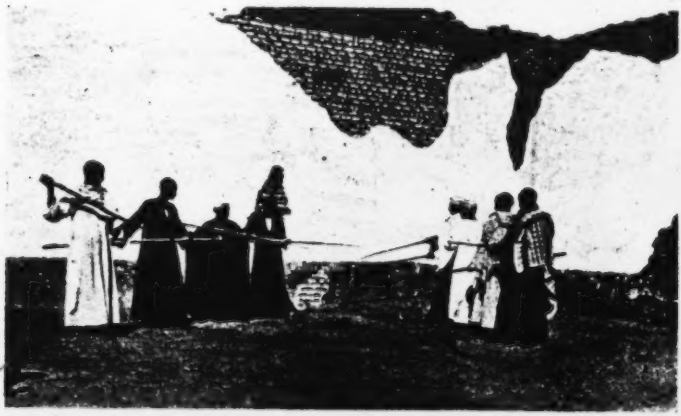

FIG. 58. ATTITUDE OF COMBATANTS IN INTER-VILLAGE FIGHTS

His house had a good balcony overlooking the whole fair, and, as the weather was very hot, I was only too glad to be able to watch what was going on from so sheltered and comfortable a position. Suddenly, without apparent warning, out came the *nabābīt* (plural of *nabbūt*), and the fun began. The head guard, however, is skilful in using the *kurbāg*, and he was soon in the thick of it, slashing right and left, accompanied by a soldier, similarly armed, who had been sent as my bodyguard. Presently the combatants fled helter-skelter down side-passages—anywhere, in fact, to get out of reach of the well-directed lashes of the whips! Peace again reigned, but not for long. A crowd composed of members of the two antagonistic villages again collected, and sticks once more had free play. This fight was stopped in the same manner as the previous one, but there were two or three repetitions before a final armistice was enforced.

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THE FELLĀḤĪN OF UPPER EGYPT

One of the customs that one would be glad to see die out in Egypt is the blood-feud. As far as I can gather from scholars acquainted with the ancient history of the country, this custom does not seem to be a native one. I fancy it must have been introduced into Egypt at the time of the Arab conquest. It is a very terrible custom, and one that will be very difficult to abolish, for many of these family feuds have persisted for several generations, and still continue with no sign of abatement. The weapons used in con-

FIG. 50. CROWD PULLING THE ROPES TO RAISE THE SUNKEN VESSEL

nexion with blood-feuds are often the same as those used in inter-village fights, though firearms are sometimes employed. The rule is, so I was told, that the murderer, or a member of his family, must be killed by the avenger with exactly the same form of weapon as he (the murderer) used, and, if possible, on the very spot where the murder to be avenged was committed.

One day, as I was riding through the cultivation, an Egyptian friend of mine who was with me pointed to a certain place in the fields where a man had lately been strangled by a large handkerchief being tightly knotted round his throat. Shortly afterward, my friend told me, vengeance was taken by a member of the victim's family, who killed one of the murderer's relatives in the same way

ever be allowed to die of hunger. The mutual help of the men in field-work and of the women in housework, the more readily given as poverty is greater, deserves every commendation. The way in which the fellaheen will work to accomplish something in the common interest, when they are not under orders, shows what they are capable of. Yet when land, a woman, or an '*omda* is in question, rival parties are established and the feud is kept up in every family from generation to generation. Everyone in the village has to take sides. Neutrals are despised. The antagonism, though usually latent, will show itself suddenly over some trivial matter, such as the shifting of a boundary mark, a theft of manure, or a *gamoossa* trespassing. Then human life counts for nothing, and death takes a holiday, especially in villages where there is Arab blood in the fellah's veins.

Thus life is lived in constant insecurity. To feel this, one must spend a night in a village. As soon as night falls precautions are taken against a possible foe. The cattle, including the camel if there is one, are brought indoors and shut in the house. The family also take refuge together behind the great closed door. The head of the house often stays outside watching his field or his water, for the enemy is always on the prowl. As the shadows deepen, the dogs begin to bark and gunshots become frequent.

The shots come not only from the unsleeping watchman, trying to reassure himself and everyone else, but also from fellaheen armed going in defiance of the law. During harvest the fellaheen become even more suspicious, and may be seen with a rifle slung over their shoulders as they stand with their feet in water to gather the last tufts of cotton.

In May 1936 the village of Qalandol was divided into two camps over the selection of an '*omda* — the friends of Mahmud Bakr on the one side, and those of Aly Abbas on the other. Mahmud Bakr made some slanderous remarks about his opponent, and one morning his son was found dead in the fields. A few days later the sister of Aly Abbas was stabbed as a reprisal. After that, for a whole year, both sides watched and waited. Neither work nor journeys were undertaken alone, but always in groups. One market day, when crowds of fellaheen had come from villages near, a young man of the party of Mahmud Bakr was insulted by an opponent, whom he struck. At once the supporters of Aly Abbas

8:Schaefer A-5 (1900-1901) 1904
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516
142
302
291
411
115

Photograph by the author.

محمود محمد العتر

Maḥmûd Mohammed el-'Ìtr
Watchman of the Administration of Antiquities in the Desert of Saqqāra.

[p. ii] [p. iii is blank]

8:Schaefer A-5 (1900-1901) 1904
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62.

Lamentations for the Dead.

539x
765

The lamentations of a mother over her fallen son, named 'Abbûḥ. As the mention of the coat of mail indicates, it is, without doubt, an old song, or, from the favorite tales of the adventures of renowned Arab heroes. [173]

Compare the remark on No. 21.

'Abbūḥ, ya 'Abbūḥ,
ibn-el-'arab madbūḥ,
wummo warâ bitnūḥ,
wit'ūl: ya waladi,
ya lābis ez-zaradî,
sikkinetak ḫūṣa
fil-arḍē marṣūṣa,
ma rasṣēhāš illāni.

'Abbûḥ, 'Abbûḥ,
The Arab, is slain.
His mother mourns for him
And says: "O my son,
O thou who wearest the coat of mail,
Thy sword is like a palm-leaf,
Buried in the earth,
And no other than I has buried it."

[714]
[411]

6. "Like a palm-leaf" means, according to Maḥmûd: slender, pointed and two-edged.

7. The meaning of the last two lines is not very clear. Did the mother bury the dead together with his sword? Another of our men dictated: .... madfûse, ma rasṣēhāš illâni, hence I translate: "bury".

[P. 68 is blank]